DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 077 CS 210 393

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TITLE "Correct English" Magazine and the "Science" of Language Study.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; Language Research; *Language Usage; *Linguistic Theory; *Literacy; *Scholarly Journals; Vocabulary Development; Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Baker (Josephine Turck); *Correct English Magazine

ABSTRACT

"Correct English," published continuously between 1899 and 1950, was dedicated to the preservation of "proper" English usage. Josephine Turck Baker, editor and founder, understood that conventions of grammar arose from usage. It was her opinion that correctness was determined by clarity, not by the rules of Latin syntax. Thus, "correct" usage was defined as the careful selection of words that accurately communicated a thought or idea. Among the consequences of this instrumental view of language were (1) a preoccupation with vocabulary acquisition; (2) encouragement of students to "think first, then write" (an injunction central to the theory now known as Current-Traditional rhetoric); and (3) reduction of written composition to a purely mental exercise, with the teacher's role becoming one of exhortation in abstract principles. Baker was also convinced that literature should be taught only after students had mastered grammar and spelling, since literature was art, which she defined as the mastery of abstract rules. "Correct English" ceased publication when its editorial staff and writers became confident that universal literacy could be achieved through progressive educational policies and technology. The notion of language as an instrument or "tool of communication" has endured, even in university English departments. (AEW)

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Correct English Magazine and the "Science" of Language Study

Christopher Gould

The first American literacy "crisis" coincided with the Industrial Revolution and a rapid expansion of technical education. Out of this "crisis" came a new type of magazine dedicated to the preservation of "proper" English usage. The most popular and enduring was Correct English, published continuously between 1899 and 1950, a period that saw two other literacy "crises" and a public debate about the "death" of English grammar at the hands of linguists and philologists. Because of its wide popularity among educated non-specialists, Correct English provides a glimpse into how the middle-class public perceived and responded to these issues. The magazine's influence can be assessed by tracing two related themes, conceptualizations of language and attitudes about science, through its years of publication.

Josephine Turck Baker, editor and founder of Correct English, understood that conventions of grammar arise from usage. Unlike descriptive linguists, however, she held a rigidly normative view of usage. For Baker, correctness was not determined by the rules of Latin syntax or some arbitrary notion of "logic," but rather by clarity. "The true function of language," Baker argued, "is to communicate thought. The function of grammar is to indicate those forms of language by which thought is most clearly expressed." Thus, "correct" usage was defined as the careful selection of words that accurately

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give utterance to a preexistent meaning or reality. Good usage provided a perfect correspondence between a language of symbols and an impersonal, objective, static reality. Baker explained this view in a dialogue between Mrs. A. and Mrs. B.:

> Mrs. A.--But many persons have thoughts that they cannot express.
>
> Mrs. B.--That is not wholly true, although it is true that some persons can express their thoughts more clearly and forcibly than others; but this is because they are masters of their tools, for words are but the tools that we employ to make known our thoughts . . . .
>
> Mrs. A.--Then . . . [i]n other words, first, the concept; then, its expression.
>
> Mrs. B.--That is true of all art.

A chief theoretical consequence of this instrumental view of language was preoccupation with vocabulary acquisition. In 1901, for example, Professor Frederick E. Bolton, of Iowa State University, disputed the prevailing belief that the vocabulary of the average adult was restricted to three or four thousand words. Bolton supported his argument with findings from a study of the speech habits of a three-year-old boy. More interesting than the findings themselves, however, are the assumptions under which Bolton conducted his research, namely:

> In this list [of words used by the three-year-old] I have not included . . . any words . . . spoken in a purely imitative manner . . . . The child used many words imitatively which conveyed no correct idea . . .

> [and] many words from rhymes, etc., which were never associated with the correct ideas or in many cases were absolutely meaningless. These were excluded.

Because utterances that were purely expressive, exploratory, or playful were not "real" language, the business of education was to implant new data, thus enlarging the student's vocabulary. To Bolton, this was a socially progressive agenda:

> In this day of complex commercial, mechanical, and political and industrial surroundings, it would not be surprising if mechanics, working men, and uneducated tradesmen know and use many hundreds, possibly thousands, of terms that Shakespeare or Milton never heard.

Bolton saw the influence of technology on language and education as democratizing: any laborer might become another Shakespeare or Milton, if only she could acquire a large enough vocabulary.

A chief pedagogical consequence of an instrumental view of language was instruction that enjoined students to "think first, then write"--an injunction central to the theory now known as Current-Traditional rhetoric. Composing was reduced to a purely mentalistic exercise, and the teacher's role became one of exhortation in abstract principles. Accordingly, a Mrs. Stacey Williams, describing "The Art of Teaching," attributed the "many failures" of education to "the fact that teaching remains on an imitative instead of a reasoning basis. . . . The duty of the teacher is to instruct the pupil in certain mental and physical laws that govern all sound effort." Williams concluded that the

"science of mind" dictated a more efficient approach:

> Let the mind be a background on which the teacher may paint his meaning . . . . In this way the tendency to imitation is reduced to a minimum, your study becomes psychic, and . . . progress must follow in the steps of mental advancement.

Two key terms, science and art, appear strategically in these and other discussions of language and education in the early issues of Correct English. The word science was invoked frequently to lend authority to established beliefs. For example, when Williams called for a return to traditional, authoritarian schooling, she appealed to the "science of mind." Likewise, when Baker compared writers and words to carpenters and tools, she cited The Science of Thought as her supporting authority. Bolton, too, cited The Science of Language for similar purposes. But, while these writers may have invoked the word rather carelessly, they held a fairly conventional nineteenth-century view of science: rational, empirical, positivistic, mentalistic.

Correspondingly, art was defined as the mastery of abstract rules--the result of conscious mental discipline. Thus, when Baker explained why literature should be taught after students had mastered grammar and spelling, she reasoned: "Before one ca attain to an art, one must first understand not only the rules and principles of that art but also their proper application."

A second literacy "crisis" developed in 1918, when the Army discovered that thirty percent of its recruits were unable to

read and understand English. There was little response to this new "crisis" in Correct English. Instead, the most noticeable effect that World War I had on the magazine was Baker's adoption of pacifism. Along with it came a surprising reversal of opinion about science and technology. In 1921, Baker denounced science for keeping "mankind imbedded in the deep strata of materialism." Science, she explained, "interprets Life as consciousness resulting from organic functioning. Poetry interprets Life as consciousness producing the functioning." Baker embraced the belief "tabooed by the scientist . . . that consciousness controls the manifestation of life, and is not the result of the functioning of life." This represents a sharp contradiction to the epistemology of Current-Traditional rhetoric, which explains perception mechanistically: the mental faculties are shaped by the sensory data of experience; the mind cannot impose form on reality; the concrete is the basis of all knowledge. One might expect an altered conceptualization of language to arise from such a shift in epistemology. But there is no evidence of this in the 1920's.

There was renewed strife in the 1930's, when linguistic theories began to exert a greater influence in English education. Proponents of these theories, mostly university professors, described their methods of inquiry as scientific. Their adversaries responded with strident attacks on the professoriate, whom they accused of cowardice, indolence, cynicism, and even ignorance, as well as eggheadedness. Science, however, remained a watchword in the debate, as prescriptivists tried to contradict

their opponents' claims to scientific authority.

In 1937 Correct English published an essay in which an indignant Wilson Follett complained: "Grammar, instead of being revitalized as the indispensable science of saying what one wishes to say, is flung out." Speaking "In Defense of the Purists," Dwight Bolinger disputed the legitimacy of the philologists' appeals to "science":

> The sciences that have made 'science' a name to conjure with are the practical sciences or those that give fair promise to becoming practical . . . . [Philologists] do not have and probably never can attain any claim to the glory that surrounds the name of science--technical science.

Thus, science continued to be a privileged term, with both Follett and Bolinger striving to deny their opponents the cachet of scientific methodology. Bolinger spoke reverentially of the "prestige" of science, attained "through what it has done, not through what it knows." Not only, then, was knowledge defined empirically; pragmatic knowledge was supposedly better.

Throughout the 1930's, conceptualizations of language in Correct English remained instrumental. Following are some typical defining analogies: "thoughts worth thinking are worth adequate clothing. . . . When we build a house we require nails of various sizes--likewise when constructing a sentence we must resort to words of varying lengths"; "correct English and a good vocabulary are to the conversationalist what brushes and paints are to the artist."

In May 1942 (ironically within days of Baker's death), President Roosevelt directed public attention to yet another literacy "crisis" by disclosing that 433,000 young men had failed to quality for military conscription because they could not pass a literacy test. In the first article to take note of this latest "crisis," I. Colondy, editor of Words magazine, opened: "That 20% of the entering class at Harvard must be taught the fundamentals of reading is largely the result of the methods that psychologists, who tinker with education, have forced on the country." Specifically, Colondy complained that the experts "are for teaching reading without teaching the meaning of individual words." The fact that there were "16,000,000 illiterates who cannot read beyond the fourth grade level" could be blamed on the public school system's neglect of reading comprehension, spelling, and grammar and its reluctance to make students work. Any return to "common sense" was impossible so long as educational psychologists were held in esteem. Colondy sniffed: "In the presence of statistics, reason, good sense, and everything else is of no avail."

Like Bolton, Colondy was preoccupied with vocabulary acquisition, worrying that the freshmen he taught at Los Angeles City College did not have the 110,000 word vocabulary attributed to them by psychologists. Likewise, another writer reasoned that "Children must spell if they are to write. Writing is really writing thoughts, but thoughts are expressed in words. Those words need to be spelled." The same writer meticulously calculated the number of words in a typical child's vocabulary

and, hence, the number of spelling words that she should be taught. These writers were convinced that little could be accomplished before children had mastered the "tools" of communication by memorizing the meanings and spellings of words.

Such views did not go unchallenged, however. The new editor of Correct English published an article in which Walter Guest Kellogg dismissed grammar instruction as "a thing of laws, rules, ordinances, bylaws and exceptions; an unscientific, illogical, inflexible dictum which emphasizes the letter and not the spirit." The response of Correct English to the third American literacy "crisis" was, then, neither consistent nor decisive.

During the late forties, Correct English became a mouthpiece for the NCTE and other like-minded organizations. Articles explained and defended progressive innovations in language education, such as the "Experience Curriculum" or "Personal Growth Model" of instruction, described by Professor Aileen Kitchin of Teachers College: "New approaches to language learning and teaching are developing out of modern linguistic science. . . . A few teachers and students are discovering . . . [these] scientific approaches." Kitchin concluded: "The primary function of language is not, as we have so often been told, the expression of thought."

As Kitchin's remarks demonstrate, science remained a privileged term, although its invocation by progressive educators carried a certain hubris about the efficacy of educational technology. For example, one writer forecast the elimination of reading deficiencies through sophisticated testing measures. He

cited the case of one fourteen-year-old non-reader:

> [T]he clinicians . . . used the clinic's many machines: the flashmeter, which measures speed of word recognition; the movie camera, which records habits of eye movement; the metronoscope, which prevents the eye from going back to reread a phrase or line. . . .
>
> They went at this boy with microscopic patience until his every last difficulty was identified and recorded on a big folding chart. Then the clinicians set about removing his difficulties, one by one, in the same way a good surgeon sets about an intricate operation.

It seems appropriate that Correct English should cease publication only a few months later, its editorial staff and writers confident that universal literacy could be achieved through progressive educational policies and technology. This confidence, however, produced expectations that came to haunt educators during two subsequent literacy "crises"--one growing out of the launching of Sputnik, the other brought on in the wake of open-admissions policies begun in the 1970's. Science has remained a privileged term in debates arising out of both these "crises." Language study--rhetoric and composition in particular--is now eager to appropriate the cachet of scientific methodology. Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions has become an especially hot property, as writers search eagerly for evidence of a "paradigm shift" in English studies.

And, of course, "pop grammar" is again a growth industry,

with a flurry of magazines, newsletters, and books devoted to "correct" English usage, many of them authored or edited by self-appointed experts of the Josephine Turck Baker mold. To most of these pop grammarians, science is a word that carries negative associations, especially when used in connection with research in education and the social sciences. This has led some scholars to dismiss pop grammarians as anti-intellectual demagogues. However, the pop grammarians' premise that language is an instrument or "tool of communication" is still widely held, even in university English departments. Consider, for example, that perennial classic of freshman English, George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language":

> What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. . . . Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations.

Josephine Turck Baker could not have put it better.